Improving earnings by migrating for work

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When people get financial help or better information about how much they could earn by moving for work, they are more likely to migrate, and when they do, they tend to earn more and send more money back home—especially for international moves. But migrating often entails poor working and living conditions, so some programs have helped people assess risks, have better migration experiences, and find better opportunities.



A woman holding a passport before boarding a flight.

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Summary

Many people live in places with limited job opportunities and low earnings but could earn more by moving elsewhere. According to some estimates, people earn three to six times as much by moving from a low- to high-income country (HIC), . Rural to urban migration also raises earnings—though typically less than international migration, —and is more common since there are fewer barriers to moving domestically. Given these expected gains, a key question is why more people do not choose to move or why more governments do not facilitate movement to fill growing labor shortages in HICs. Another important question is how policies can enable safe and productive migration and improve livelihoods for migrants and their families.

There are many theories for why people do not migrate. The journey may be costly or financially risky, and a job is not always guaranteed. People may not have the right skills or lack reliable information about the benefits and risks of moving, . Migrating often entails leaving families behind or losing access to support systems at home, and migrants often face poor housing

conditions or pollution in cities, among other concerns, . Potential migrants might also anticipate exploitation, discrimination, targeting by anti-immigrant groups, and legal systems that do not protect them. Finally, and often most importantly for international migration, people may lack access to a visa or work permit.[1]

A review of 42 randomized evaluations and five quasi-experimental evaluations[2], looked at strategies to address these potential barriers and/or estimated the returns to migration. These programs spanned many types of movement for work: from rural to urban settings within the same country, from one low- and middle-income country (LMIC) to another LMIC often on temporary work contracts, and even some longer-term moves from LMICs to HICs.[3] Cited studies cover temporary, seasonal, and long-term migration, largely through legal pathways. This policy insight focuses on "economic migrants" and does not focus on refugees, asylum seekers, or internally displaced people.

Across the 47 studies, moving for work raised incomes and remittances sent home, though migrants sometimes felt worse off due to demanding jobs and difficult working and living conditions. Financial support often removed barriers to migration, but how the cash was delivered, the amount, and who was targeted were important. Providing potential migrants with quality information helped clarify migration's trade-offs, often leading to safer migration and work experiences. Tools that helped migrants more easily send remittances often improved well-being for family members back home. More research should explore how to expand migrants' access to decent public services and housing in host communities without straining local systems, the effects of migrant workers on the well-being and attitudes of people in host communities, long-term effects on migrants' home communities, and how to best implement migration support programs at scale. Policymakers should consider providing cash to cover relocation and visa fees or information that helps people discern safe and reliable opportunities, strengthen formal protections for migrant workers and regulate migration intermediaries, and make it easier for people to send money back home.

Supporting evidence

Programs that make it easier to migrate for work usually help people earn more and send more money back home. In 18 of 22 interventions that measured earnings, programs that helped people move for work raised incomes, especially for international moves [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [7], [9], [10], [12], [14], [18], [19], [26], [28], [29], [31], [34], [35], [36], [38], [40], [45], . In Bangladesh, offering rural households a US$8.50 transport subsidy made it more likely that a household member would migrate to urban areas, and migrants earned about US$105 total and saved half of this amount [10], . In western Kenya, providing rural households with accurate information about earnings in cities made it more likely that they would migrate and go to a bigger city like Nairobi, and raised their earnings by US$33 per month relative to those who did not receive this information [1], . Also in Bangladesh, migrants earned three times more when they moved to Malaysia after winning a visa lottery [7], . In eleven of fourteen interventions that measured remittances, programs that helped people migrate or supported them while abroad increased how much money they sent home. Much of this increase was driven by people who migrated internationally [1], [2], [4], [7], [9], [22], [23], [24], [25], [26], [27], [35], [36], [46].

Table 1. Type of migration by cited studies

Type of migration	Relevant studies

Rural to urban	[1], [3], [6], [9], [10], [12], [13], [14], [15], [18], [19], [23], [24], [44], [47]
LMIC to LMIC	[4], [5], [17], [32], [33]
LMIC to HIC	[2], [5], [7], [8], [11], [16], [20], [21], [22], [25], [26], [27], [28], [29], [30], [31], [32], [33], [34], [35], [36], [37], [38], [39], [40], [41], [42], [43], [45], [46]

Despite being able to earn and remit more, migrants may face exploitation and tough living and working conditions. Migrating can entail hardships like unstable or bad housing, pollution in cities, trouble getting social services, , leaving children behind, and less access to friends and family for help when a hardship arises. Work environments can be hazardous, , unpleasant, or even exploitative, , especially when migrants cannot easily switch jobs or firms hold a lot of power. In the United Arab Emirates, when Indian men were offered temporary construction jobs through a guest worker program, they had large earnings gains, but they sometimes felt worse off due to the physically taxing work and uncomfortably hot climate. Only 58 percent of men who were offered these jobs migrated—many knew they could earn more by going but were reluctant because of the severe working conditions [2].

Financial support, like cash or subsidies, often increases migration by making it less risky to relocate [3], [4], [7], [9], [10], [12], [14], [15], [18], [31], [38].Especially for families with little money to spare, financing a migration trip is a risky investment. Cash or subsidies for migration can help families afford to send someone to work in a place with more job opportunities. In some cases, a small amount made a difference. In rural Bangladesh, a US$8.50 transport subsidy for migration that was enough to cover round-trip bus fare and a few days of food during the annual "hungry season," a time with limited resources and work, led more households to send a family member to work in the city. The lowest-income households, for whom failed migration is riskiest, were least likely to migrate without the subsidy but were the most responsive to it, suggesting the one-time payment reduced the risk of migrating. Migrants earned more, and family members back home saved and ate more during the lean season when their family member got the transport subsidy [10]. A transport subsidy or similar cash payment might be less effective in areas with close access to cities, where people could easily get to the city without any financial help, or in places where there is no large city close enough to travel to.

People often face even larger financial and legal barriers to international migration. In Bangladesh, the government signed an agreement with the government of Malaysia in 2013 to send 11,500 agricultural workers abroad on two-year contracts. The government of Bangladesh provided migration support services, including medical checks, training, and visa processing at a lower cost than private companies Visas were allocated by lottery because the program had more applications than available spots. Five years later, 76 percent of winners had migrated abroad—mostly to Malaysia—compared to 19 percent of lottery losers. The program lowered the cost of these migration services to around US$400 per migrant (from US$3,000–$4,000), expanding international migration opportunities to households that could not previously afford it [7].

Even programs without an explicit migration focus have increased migration when they boosted families' cash reserves. In Comoros, households were invited to join a public works program during which one member could earn a steady income. With more cash on hand, households were 38 percent more likely to migrate relative to the comparison group [4]. However, in a quasi-experimental study from India, a public works program decreased rural to urban migration. Once the program provided work opportunities close to home, people had less reason to migrate in search of work.

But who you target, the amount, and how you give the cash matter [3], [7], [12], [14], [18], [31], . In the example that offered small transport subsidies in Bangladesh, the program worked even better when more households in a village received subsidies because neighbors traveled together and shared costs and risk [12], . However, a follow-up study showed that the program became less effective when scaled to 150,000 households, partly because it was easiest to reach people with loans—versus a transport subsidy—who would have migrated anyway, instead of households that were the most financially constrained and could not otherwise migrate [18], . The program that subsidized migration costs from Bangladesh to Malaysia was still unaffordable for households making under US$1.90 a day. These lowest-income families were the target group for the small transport subsidies for rural to urban migration described above. More connective research is needed to identify the "best-fit" policies for different groups [7].

In West Timor, Indonesia, a program offered rural households either unconditional cash, a small amount of cash given only if they migrated, or a larger amount if they migrated. Households offered the smaller cash transfer—that just covered travel costs—earned the most, while migrants offered the larger transfer—that exceeded the cost of migrating—earned less. This extra incentive likely caused people who were less skilled or less suited for the destination labor market to also migrate, sometimes just to collect the transfer or visit family or friends [14]. Policymakers should be mindful of transfer size and potential unintended effects when designing such programs.

In rural Kenya, one program offered young men unemployment insurance of US$4 per day while they looked for a job in Nairobi for up to fifteen days, given only if they migrated. These men were more likely to move to the city and stay after the payments ended. Compared to a one-time, unconditional payment given regardless of whether people moved, the insurance provided a safety net that made moving less risky and more appealing for people who otherwise would not have moved. Men who were offered unemployment insurance did not have higher earnings after eight months but did after 1.5 years, likely because it takes time to find a job, build a new network, and earn more over time [3].

People often do not know how much they could earn if they migrated [1], [6], [13], [14], [19], [21], [28], . Potential migrants might under- or overestimate how much they could earn from migrating. In Kenya, rural residents underestimated how much they could earn in larger urban centers by nearly 50 percent, likely because current migrants underreported their urban income to avoid sending more money back home [1], . In Tonga, men who applied for a lottery to migrate to New Zealand underestimated how much they could earn abroad—though women who applied had accurate expectations [28], . The researchers suggest extended family provided false or inaccurate information about their earnings in New Zealand to reduce the pressure of sending remittances back home. In contrast, potential migrants in India were overoptimistic about being able to find a well-paying job close to home [13].

When job seekers had better information about the trade-offs of moving for work, they were more likely to migrate in many cases but deterred from moving when the information was negative [1], [5], [6], [8], [11], [13], [19], [21], [32], [33], [39], . In the example from Kenya described above, many job seekers migrated to larger cities and earned more when given more accurate information about urban conditions, like job availability, earnings, and food costs [1], . In follow-up research, rural families were given information about working in Nairobi individually, individually with a mentor connection, or during a group meeting. All groups were more likely to move. The information plus mentorship was most impactful for people with fewer connections in Nairobi, migration experience, income, and education, likely because mentors shared the benefits of migrating to Nairobi to people with the highest barriers [19], . People may also be less interested in migrating or less likely to actually do so when given information about migration's risks [5], [8], [32], [33], [39], . In Guinea, providing potential migrants with information about the physical and legal risks of migrating without a visa to Europe decreased the migration rate to 0.8 percent from the comparison group rate of 1.6 percent [32].

Giving migrants better information about risks, available services, and their rights helped them choose better opportunities with less mistreatment [5], [8], [16], [20], [22], [26], [36], [43], . For example, Indonesian women who migrate to the Middle East and East Asia as domestic workers often rely on job placement agencies to connect them to an employer abroad, and agency quality varies widely. When women got information about agencies' quality, they spent more time evaluating opportunities before migrating and picked better-quality agencies. They were less likely to migrate in the short term, but those who did had better experiences abroad [8], . In a quasi-experimental study, the Sri Lankan government provided two years' advance notice of public ratings for agencies placing Sri Lankan migrants in jobs in Gulf countries. Before the ratings went public, low-quality agencies started placing Sri Lankan migrants into higher-paying and less abusive employment [43]. More research should look at other strategies to protect people from risky migration and improve access to trustworthy sources.

Information can also help migrants find better job opportunities at their destination. When Filipina migrants employed as domestic workers in Singapore got information about their legal rights to change employers, instructions on how to request job transfers, access to a free online job portal, and a printout of ten recent job postings, they were more likely to take a job with better working conditions. The information was most helpful for workers who had limited prior knowledge about their rights and who faced poor working conditions [20].

Programs that target employers might help, too. In Hong Kong and Saudi Arabia, when Filipina migrant domestic workers were encouraged to build a personal connection by providing a small gift and sharing a family photo with their employer, they experienced less mistreatment and better working conditions [22]. Establishing this type of personal connection may be a simple and low-cost way to improve working conditions, but governments and private companies should still strengthen policies that reduce mistreatment of migrant workers. Existing evidence on firm-level interventions aimed at improving worker well-being has led to safer workplaces, and better worker health and job satisfaction, though these programs were not targeted at migrants.

Making it easier for migrants to send remittances back home or for families to access this income—such as through mobile money, loans, or calling cards to boost communication—often improved households' well-being [17], [23], [24], [25], [26], [27], [29], [30]. Remittances are an important source of income for people experiencing poverty, but high transaction fees, low financial literacy, and logistical barriers can reduce the amount of money that migrants send back home. In rural Mozambique, where mobile money is not widely available, providing mobile banking to farming households increased migration to urban centers for at least two years. Rural households received more remittances one and two years later and could better handle shocks like floods, job loss, or health issues [24], . In Bangladesh, however, urban migrants had worse emotional and physical health in the short run when offered access to a mobile banking platform, likely because they faced pressure from their families to work more and send more money back home [23].

Families back home also need to access remittances at the right time. In Nepal, migrants often brought their remittances back with them after temporary migration to India, but their families often went hungry during the lean season when the migrant was away. When families got a loan while the migrant was away, they were more food secure and better off, and migrants saved more while away and remitted more later to pay the loan, suggesting the importance of improved access to and better-timed remittances [17].

Who you train in financial education programs matters to boost financial knowledge, remittances, and savings among migrants' family members [25], [26], [29], [30], . In Indonesia, migrants and their families were invited to participate in financial literacy training, randomly assigning the migrant, the family member, or both to receive the training. When the training was offered to both the migrant and their family, the household was more likely to engage in budgeting and financial planning and save more from remittance income. However, training the migrant alone did not increase savings, suggesting the importance of involving other household members in financial planning and decision-making [29].

Migration impacts origin economies and communities, but how they change depends on which conditions are strongest [12], [37], [41], [44], [47], . In Bangladesh, access to urban jobs not only boosted incomes for migrants but also raised local wages and created new opportunities in the village [12], —findings echoed by quasi-experimental evidence in Indonesia [44].

In historical data from the United States, rural counties often mechanized around the same time that they lost workers, , yet survey data from LMICs suggest that changes in farming depended on the amount of money sent home and the impacts of lost labor. Domestic migration was associated with households moving away from agriculture altogether in India and in Bangladesh [41], [47], while international migration—where remittances are higher—is more likely to be associated with mechanization.

While evidence from randomized evaluations remains thin, quasi-experimental and observational research show that migration and remittances can boost human capital, trade linkages, and economic development, in origin countries, like in the Philippines,

. However, quasi-experimental research also reveals nuanced, adverse effects: in the Philippines, , children fared worse in school when mothers rather than fathers migrated, and in China, daughters were more likely to be left behind than sons and were worse off when parents migrated. More research should explore programs that enable people to bring their children when migrating or maintain better connectivity between family members.

More policy innovation and research should explore how to improve conditions for migrants, how migrants affect the well-being and shape the attitudes of people in host countries, how to match migrant workers to labor shortages, and how to implement labor mobility programs at scale. More research should evaluate sustainable ways for host communities to provide better public services, amenities, housing, and worker protections for migrants. Since visa policies often depend on host-country attitudes toward immigrants, more research should examine the effects of migrant workers on the well-being of consumers, voters, and citizens in destination economies.

A popular model to facilitate safe migration and upskill local workforces is government-to-government agreements like Global Skills Partnerships, , which are often set up bilaterally to train potential migrants in origin countries to fill specific skill shortages in destination countries. More research should measure the impacts of these programs and other bilateral labor agreements on migrants' skills and earnings, hiring firms' productivity, and origin countries' labor markets and social protection programs.

Finally, many programs that make it easier for people to migrate have not been tested at scale, and when they have, they were less effective because of implementation issues. More research should explore how to run these programs at scale. Future research should also explore the trade-offs between policies that facilitate migration and policies that focus on creating better jobs at home so people have options to earn a living without moving.

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1. Policy discussions on migration restrictions frequently center around concerns that immigrants will take jobs from locals. While this question falls outside the scope of this brief, quasi-experimental and historical data have shown that across a range of contexts, international migration was associated with zero or small, , and sometimes positive, , changes to host community wages when migrants arrive. However, some influxes were associated with negative wage changes for certain people, such as prior immigrants whose profiles were most like new migrants, . On average, migrants from rural areas are more like locals in cities, , so internal migration may be associated with more negative wage effects, but rural to urban migration was associated with increases in formal employment in one instance.
2. Studies included in this count measure earnings, remittances, and/or other related economic outcomes. This brief also references and links to other studies that do not fit this inclusion criterion, which are not included in this count.
3. For a more in-depth discussion of quantitative evidence on international migration and its related policies, see this literature review from VoxDev.

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